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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to determine whether young children are aware of sociolinguistic and social interactional differences in language use and of the appropriateness of varied linguistic forms in particular situations, roles and relationship. The speech of 24 children ranging in age from 3 years, 9 months to 7 years, 1 month was recorded in role-playing situations. The aspect of the study presented in this paper describes what five-year-old children consider appropriate speech for different family members. Generally fathers' speech was straightforward, unqualified and forceful while mothers' speech was polite, qualified and softer. The language of both parents demarcated their roles within the family. The speech of the young child was marked with a number of phonological, prosodic and lexical characteristics unique to this register. Results are also presented of some quantitative analyses of the distribution of some lexical items and directive types. Differences were found in the use of baby talk words, endearments and boundary markers ("Well," "now," etc) and in the kinds of directives used with each role. Two points stressed in conclusion are the advantages of using children's role-playing speech for research and the importance of going beyond standard measures of linguistic development in assessing what children know about language. (AMH)

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Young Children's Knowledge of Role-Related Speech Differences: A Mommy is not a Daddy is not a Baby[1,2]

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In acquiring full communicative competence, children must learn to speak not only grammatically, but also appropriately (Hymes, 1972). At some time during acquisition they must learn a variety of sociolinguistic and social interactional rules which govern appropriate language use. Though the language addressed to two-year-olds may be of a highly specalized nature, by the time children reach age four or five, they have had experience in diverse speech settings: they go to the doctor, to preschool, to birthday parties, to the grocery store. They participate in a variety of speech situations, with people who differ in age, sex, status, and familiarity, and whose speech will therefore vary in a number of systematic ways.

Are young children aware of these sociolinguistic and social interactional differences? What do they know about the appropriateness of varied linguistic forms used to indicate particular situations and particular roles and relationships? Role play is one of the means available to them for experimenting with linguistic aspects of social interaction (Grimshaw & Holden, 1976). Ervin-Tripp (1973) has noted that when nursery school children role play they often adopt consistent speech patterns in accordance with the social categories involved--mothers and babies, doctors, etc. One way to elicit use of such speech patterns, then, would be to set up specific role-playing situations for the children. However, since I found that the attention span of four- and five-year-olds was very short under such conditions, in this research I used a number of role-specific puppets for whom children had to "do the voices." In this way, I obtained longer, more fluent speech in several different settings, discourse which revealed the nature of the language styles,or registers, in the children's repertoires.

I recorded the speech of 24 children (half boys, half girls) ranging in age from 3;9-7;3, in three different role-playing situations (Andersen, in preparation). In one session, for example, a child would speak for puppets representing a father, a mother, and a baby; in another session, the same child would role play a teacher, a student, and a foreign student; in the third, he or she would speak as a doctor, a nurse, and a patient. The child was asked to play two roles at a time--so as to elicit contrasting "styles"--while the experimenter played a third, mainly to keep the session going.

In the present paper I'd like to concentrate on the family situation, and describe what five-year-old children seem to consider appropriate speech for different family members. I'll first give a brief overview of the speech these children ascribe to the roles of father, mother, and child, and then concentrate on quantitative analyses of a small subset of distinctions.

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First, fathers: Fathers' speech was straightforward, unqualified, and forceful. They all used deep voices, frequently spoke louder than any other family member (sometimes yelling), and showed a marked tendency to produce shifted vowels. They backed and lowered vowels in a manner that produced an almost sinister "accent": e.g., Yes [jɛs] →Yus [jʌs]; Bad [b æd] →Bod [ba·d]. Their sentences were shorter than the mothers', but longer than the children's.[3] They used the greatest proportion of direct imperatives, and--even excluding one-word answers to yes/no questions--a large proportion of their turns were single utterance turns. Unlike the mothers, they didn't usually explain the rationale behind their directives and other speech acts. Also, just as Berko-Gleason found for real fathers, their language clearly demarcated their role within the family. In my corpus, fathers talked mainly about going to work, "firing the secretary," having meetings, or building a new "repartment" building. Consider example (1)[4]:

(1) Em What would you like for lunch?
Sf I'm supposed to go to work now anyway.
Em All right, dear.
Sf I'm gonna have a meeting there, so I won't see you late tonight.

and example (2), where the discussion has been about needed groceries:

(2) Em Why don't you pick some up on the way home from work?
Sf Maybe. No, I don't think I will have any time. 'Cause I'm going to a meeting after I come home from work.

Moreover, in addition to showing the limits of fathers' responsibilities, their language also makes explicit the role of the mother in the family, as in example (3).

(3) Sc Should I have [bwɛkfɪs] now?
Sf Ask your mother.

Similarly, when asked for a bedtime story, these fathers are likely to respond as in (4):

(4) Ec Tell me a story.
Sf Mommy will.
Ec No, I want you to - - -.
Sf I'm going to sleep.

In a similar case, when the child had requested a story, the father responded like the father in (4) but when pressed further, he reluctantly agreed with the minimal:

(5) Sf All right. Sit down. "Once upon a time. The end."

In contrast to this direct, forceful speech of fathers, mothers were more talkative, more polite, and their speech was qualified and softer.

They spoke with higher pitch than fathers, and often used exaggerated intonation, but rarely approached the volume that marked the fathers' utterances. They used more endearments and baby talk terms, but fewer direct imperatives than fathers. Their utterances were longer than any other family members' (see footnote 3), and they tended to have more multi-utterance turns.[5] In addition, these turns were longer than the multi-utterance turns of the fathers--largely because the mothers qualified or explained almost everything they did or requested. Example (6) is a fairly typical illustration of some of these characteristics in the mothers' speech to child and to father:

(6) Sm Gotta get the baby tucked into beddy bye. She's not a sleepy. (to baby) Go to sleep, sleep, sleep, darling. Go to sleep. (turns to father) Don't you think it's time to go to bed? It's midnight--we should go to bed.

The content of the mothers' speech revolves around family care. Mothers talked about putting children to bed, as in the example just cited and in (7):

(7) S_c Mommy, I'm all done.
Sm OK, sweetie. Now it's time for your naptime.

They told fairly long, involved bedtime stories, with great expression, they were responsible for everyone's food, as in (8):

(8) Ef What did you do today?
Sm I had a little bit of a treat.
Ef What was that?
Sm Ravioli.
.
.
.
Ef Didn't you go out?
Sm No I didn't.
Ef You spent all day making ravioli?
Sm Yes.

and they took seriously matters like birthday parties, as in (9):

(9) Sm It's gonna be her birthday tomorrow.
Ef Whose birthday is tomorrow?
Sm Oh, Honey's.
Ef Oh. Do I know her?
Sm Yes, you do! Just the child that you put to bed.
Ef Oh, I was just kidding.
Sm Stop kidding me. (laughter)

Speech as young <u>child</u> is probably the easiest of the three roles to distinguish apart from context, largely because of a number of phonological, prosodic and lexical characteristics which systematically mark the register and are unique to it. Most of the children in the study began the child

role by marking it with a goo-goo, gaga, or a,a, until told that "this child is a little older than that." They then adjusted to more "normal" English in a high pitch, with: (1) a babytalk overtone that might be called palatalized speech (i.e., the tongue seems to be kept higher in the mouth and the vocal cavity made smaller; (2) some nasalization; and (3) some whining utterances, in which vowels were lengthened, often on heavily stressed syllables, as in example (10):

(10) Sc I [wɑ̃́:nəʃ go to the pɑ́rk and [plé́i:].
Em Your daddy will take you.
Sc [Ma:ma.]

In addition to the goo-goo's and gaga's I mentioned, there are other sound effects such as the fairly frequent waah /wæ̃:/, indicating dissatisfaction, as in example (11):

(11) Sc Now, I want carrot.
En Why don't we wait 'til lunchtime for that?
Sc Waa-h! (see also #14 below)

A number of phonological substitutions also occurred in this role. These included:

/θ/ → {[f], [d], [3]} e.g. "...birfday at fwee-firty" (birthday at three-thirty)
"...wid de flowers" (with the flowers)
"[ʒɪʃ] one" (this one)

/d/ → [g] e.g. "googie googie" (goody-goody)

/s/ → {[θ], [ʃ]} e.g. "Yeth" (yes)
"[gɛʃ]" (I guess)

{/l/, /r/} → [w] e.g. "aw weady" (all ready)
"jump wope" (jump rope)

C → [ø] / ____# e.g. bwekfis (breakfast)
pwoduc 19 (Product 19)

As child, the speech contained a higher proportion of names (mostly vocatives) than the other roles--mainly Mommy and Daddy, that were frequently pre- or post-posed to questions and requests, as in examples (12) and (13):

(12) Sc Mommy, come back here. (soft voice)

(13) Sc Daddy, can you help me get dressed?

The mean length of utterance (MLU) was shortest in this role, though there are some long, very unbabylike utterances used by children portraying a baby.[6] Omission of function words also occurred, though infrequent in these data. Example 14 is an instance of an omitted copula and preposition:

(14) (child doesn't want to go to the park with Daddy)
Sc Mama, I not going that. Waa-h!

In line with the earlier discussion of mothers' role as caretaker, it is interesting to note that the child roles included two-and-a-half times as many turns addressed to mother as to father.

I'd like to turn now from this general description and present the results of some quantitative analyses of the distribution of, first, a small set of lexical items, and, second, certain directive types.

In examining the transcripts to see who used things like baby talk words, endearments, and placeholders or boundary markers (such as well, now, uh), I found that while there were some differences in the numbers of each of these items by role, there were also striking differences at a finer, perhaps more subtle, level. In the case of boundary markers, not only were there almost ten times as many of these in both mother and father speech as in child speech, but also there was a clear difference in the distribution of particular types. If we consider the two most common markers in the family context, well and uh, we find that the marker well almost never appeared in the speech of child to parent. Parents, on the other hand, used well frequently, one-and-a-half times more often than uh in the total corpus. If we look only at the utterances of parents to children, well was twice as frequent as the marker uh. The overall difference in the distribution of these markers suggests that children considered well an adult term, and its greater use in speech to child suggests it is a more authoritative marker than uh (i.e., it is used downward in rank).

In the case of endearments, there was a similar distributional difference. Only mothers and fathers used endearments, with mothers using slightly more of them. But again at a finer level there was a distinction in the distribution of certain endearment terms, including honey, sweetie, darling, and dear. For example, honey seemed to be a non-specific endearment; it was the most frequent of the terms, and was used by both mothers and fathers in addressing either each other or the child. Sweetie was the second most frequent endearment, but it was found only in mothers' speech to children. This suggests that honey is a general, all-purpose endearment, expressing only affection, but that sweetie expresses an additional dimension (e.g., downward in age or status), and it might also be a term that marks female speech. With regard to the latter point, it is interesting to note that all the endearments discussed here came from the role-playing of the female subjects: all the girls in this five-year-old-group used endearments in their family role-playing, none of the boys did.

Another lexical indication of status differences in family roles is use of the word yes and its informal variants yeah and yep. In parent-to-parent speech where the speakers have more or less equal status, the formal

Table 1
Percentage of Directives used in each Role[a] and the Syntactic Expression of Directives Requesting Action[b]

		Father to Child	Mother to Child	Child to Parent
	Directives	33	38	25
Directives for action	Imperative	88	46	31
	Declarative	12	54	46
	Interrogative	0	0	23

[a]Based on the total number of speech acts in that role

[b]The analysis of syntactic form presented here excludes all information-seeking directives, i.e., questions requiring only a verbal response

and informal versions of the affirmative occurred with equal frequency. However, in the speech of parent-to-child, where differences in age and rank exist, the more formal yes occurred two-and-a-half to three times more frequently than its informal variants. In contrast, the subjects' speech as child contained three times as many informal tokens as formal ones--an almost exact inverse of the parent-to-child ratio.

I will now turn briefly to the kinds of directives used with each role. As part of a speech act analysis of the data, I examined the directives used in each of the family roles. Part of this analysis is summarized in Table 1. A comparison of the proportion of directives in the speech of mother-to-child, father-to-child, and child-to-child, suggests there was only a small difference between roles--that parents addressed somewhat more directives to their children than vice versa. If we go one step further and, on the syntactic dimension, compare all the directives requesting an action, the data appear more interesting: these pretend-fathers used many more imperatives than mothers or children--a finding that matches the real life observations of Berko-Gleason (1975). Mothers used an equal number of declarative and imperative forms, and children used a mix of declarative, imperative, and interrogative forms. Moreover, children's interrogative forms were often imbedded imperatives that tended to be polite "upward in age or rank" forms, as in example (13).

Although mothers and children used a similar proportion of directives that were declarative in form, these directives were qualitatively different. Mothers tended to use hints, such as "Dinner's ready," "Baby's sleepy," or as in example (7), "Now it's time for your naptime," while children used many more need statements, such as "I need breakfast" (see also examples 10 and 11 cited earlier). These distinctions are reminiscent of the Sachs and Devin (1976) finding that children distinguished between internal state questions used when addressing babies and external world questions used to mothers and peers.

In conclusion, there are two points I'd like to stress. First, examination of children's role-playing speech is a way of tapping implicit knowledge about social uses of language and its appropriateness for different social roles. Secondly, these data show the importance of going beyond standard measures of linguistic development in assessing what children know about their language. Children as young as five make subtle distinctions among types of speech acts, and choose sentence structures, lexical items, and phonological features to "fit" the different roles in their socio-linguistic repertoire.

Footnotes

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[2]The data presented here are a small subset of the data to be presented in my doctoral dissertation (Andersen, in preparation) and the findings should therefore be considered preliminary.

[3]The MLU's (in words) for the three roles in this group of subjects were: mothers 6.4, fathers 4.8, children 2.3.

[4]The following code is used in all the examples cited in this paper: E = experimenter; S = subject; m = mother; f = father; c = child.

[5]An utterance is the conversational equivalent of a written sentence, with boundaries determined by prosodic markings; included in this category are phrases which express a complete idea. A turn is made up of all the utterances which form a speaker's uninterrupted contribution to the discourse.

[6]Sachs and Devin (1976) found a similar inconsistency in their role-play data.

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